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Pizza And Pizazz

Mechanical Animals Add 'Show Biz' To Restaurant

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Pepperoni, extra cheese, mushrooms, green pepper, sprouts, onions, ham, pineapple, ground chuck, olives, and . . . hold the anchovies.

No matter how you slice it, pizza is pizza.

Right?

It's still round and baked in an oven whether you doll it up with three zillion toppings, on thick or paper-thin crust, with or without tangy tomato and gooey Gorgonzola.

But at ShowBiz Pizza Place, a flashy new fast-eats emporium on bumper-to-bumper Fowler Avenue, the age-old art of eating pizza, slice by chewy slice, is made new again through the whacky electronic tinkering of a baby-faced University of South Florida graduate named Aaron Fechter.

Oh, to be sure, ShowBiz Pizza also has a nifty gift shop, a separate large-screen-TV room and a 50-plus electronic games room — all new to Bay area pizzarias.

But the restaurant's undisputed hit is its band of electronically animated, singing characters that are Fechter's brainchildren.

While patrons of all ages stuff their faces in the main dining room, they are serenaded (every eight-minutes) by a stage full of such anthropomorphic luminaries as Rolfe De Wolf (who performs with his hand-puppet buddy, the curmudgeonly Earl Schmerle); guitar-plucking Beach Bear; Duke La Rue (a hip, drumming dog from outer space) and Mitzi Mozzarella (a foxy, well-endowed mouse in cheerleader duds).

The leader of the band, called the Rock-Afire Explosion, is a piano-banging, tuxedoed gorilla named Fats.

It's a comment of sorts on popular culture to note that Fats and the gang — animals though they may be — aren't much stranger looking than half the real rock 'n' roll bands in America.

The show's host, though, is a hulking, brown, country bear who dresses in striped overalls and answers to the name of Billy Bob Brockali.

These crusty characters sing, shake and play their twangy musical instruments through the wonders of high tech and a computer-driven magnetic tape, in a fashion similar to the wired stars of Disney World's popular Country Bear Jamboree.

But Fechter is quick to point out the unique qualities of his mechanical creations.

"Disney does have what they call 'audio animatronics,' but we don't borrow any techniques they have," he said. "I call my process 'Electronimation.' It works on a system of hinges and air cylinders."

The 27-year-old inventor's styled hair, screen-printed T-shirt and chi-chi track sneakers belie his position of authority in the ShowBiz Pizza Place chain.

But Fechter is on his way to being a mogul of mozzarella, a prince among pepperoni peddlers.

The Tampa store, which opened Wednesday, is the eighth ShowBiz Pizza in the country. By the end of this year, the company plans to have 36 more restaurants rolling dough — filled with the smell of steaming pizza and the silly sounds of Billy Bob, Beach Bear and the bunch.

Fechter — through his Creative Engineering Inc. — owns 20 percent of the stock in ShowBiz Pizza Place Inc., he said.

And all because the man's got smarts in the electronics department.

Raised in Orlando, where he now lives, he was exactly the kind of kid who puts his first crystal radio set together when he was 5 years old.

By the tender age of 11, Fletcher had a small TV repair business, which he dropped when he learned he wasn't strong enough to lift most television sets.

After graduating from the University of South Florida, at 19, with a degree in finance (college engineering bored him) Fechter became what he calls "a free-lance inventor."

First he invented a three-wheeled, high-mileage automobile that ran on a 12-horsepower lawn mower engine and which nobody wanted to back.

Then Fechter dreamed up, and peddled door-to-door, a hand-held, water powered device that cleaned leaves out of backyard swimming pools.

His big break came, ironically enough, after he had been stiffed out of payment for consultant work he was doing for an electronics firm in central Florida, he said.

When the company decided not to pay him, Fechter said, he took some of the ideas he'd cooked up in his spare time and decided to incorporate them for his own, one-man company.

"I really got started in animation as a kind of revenge. I told them, "I'll use the equipment I've designed in competition with you, and may the best man win.' "

Needless to say, Fechter won. He started creating electronic, animated animals for amusement parks.

When Kansas hotel magnate Robert L. Brock saw some of Fechter's handiwork at a trade show in New Orleans a couple of years ago, he decided it was the kind of thing he needed to highlight his planned theme-pizza places.

Hence, Billy Bob and the whole technological shootin' match came into being.

Fechter, who started out as the sole employee of Creative Engineering, now has 90 employees.

They build each animated character themselves, from scratch, the same way the Pizza Place chefs make a pizza.

Using three huge Orlando warehouses, Fechter's crews make the animals, breathe life into them electronically and even record the programmed music, mostly lively rock tunes, which the Pizza Place players perform.

Fechter has his own recording studio and musicians in one warehouse, and he even plays keyboards and sings the voices for some of the characters.

Besides the heavy expansion plans for the restaurant chain, Fechter dreams of penning all of his animated friends' music someday, no longer relying on rock 'n' roll classics. And he even hopes to send some of the mechanical musicians out on the road, to act as kooky "warm-up bands" for real rock stars.

"I'd almost rather see something like this, Fechter said, indicating his animated musicians, "warming up for someone like Bob Seeger because all you really go for is the main act anyway."

Bob Seeger and the Silver Bullet Band, backed up by Billy Bob the Bear and Mitzi Mozzarella?

Considering how far his electronic savvy has taken him, it's hard to laugh at any of Aaron Fechter's dreams.

Now if he could only do something about the anchovy.

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